

The Meeting in the Air - I

Thessalonians 4:17

By Dr. Randall E. Otto

"The Meeting in the Air ([1 Thess 4:17](#))," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 19 (1997):192-212,

The Pauline assertion that those who are alive at the parousia will be caught up with the dead in Christ "to meet the Lord in the air" ([1 Thess 4:17](#)) is a unique eschatological depiction. This is "the only place where a 'rapture' of God's people is associated with the parousia." 1 That Paul should set forth this unusual perspective in a letter designed to correct eschatological misconceptions among the Thessalonians is perplexing, since this peculiarity might well have effected further confusion in the church. Paul apparently knew, however, that this unique idea of "meeting in the air" would not bewilder the Thessalonian Christians, perhaps because this idea addressed misconceptions endemic to this Greek city's religious milieu.

The Thessalonian church was comprised primarily of Gentile converts from the pagan cults of Dionysus, Zeus, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Demeter, and perhaps most important, the cult of Cabirus. They were converts from a social and religious milieu in which gods and demons were understood to have control over virtually all aspects of life. "Threatened by powers and demons, by illnesses and unforeseen strokes of fate, one lived in suspense and fear and felt subject to overpowering forces against which one could not assert oneself." 2 The Thessalonian converts may have thought that the gods and demons who inhabited the air were responsible for the persecution and death suffered in their church. In fear occasioned by the apparent victories of the forces of darkness over them, the Thessalonian church was concerned whether those who had died would be with the Lord at all, not simply at his parousia. Their own fate would thus also have been in doubt. It was with these specific concerns in mind that Paul wrote the 4,13-5,10 pericope, affirming that those whom God has elected are assuredly the Lord's, attested by their "meeting in the air" at the parousia to behold the victory of the conquering Christ over the forces of darkness.

The Issue at Thessalonica

K. P. Donfried has rightly maintained that the starting point for the interpretation of the Thessalonian correspondence must be in the reconstruction of the social and religious situation in the city at the time of the earliest Christian community. Surely the Greeks who were attracted to Paul's message would compare the gospel to the mystery cults and royal theology of their pagan past. For this reason, Paul selects his terminology for "protreptic purposes," revealing continuities and discontinuities with their pagan past so as to demonstrate "how the totality of their existence (note the

unusual stress in [1 Thess 5.23](#) on 'spirit and soul and body') has been transformed through the death of Christ into a new living relationship with him--whether awake or asleep ([1 Thess 5.10](#)). 3

Paul appears to shift abruptly from the moral counsel against pagan practice in 4:1-12 into the eschatological pericope (4:13-5:11), only to return again to brotherly exhortations in 5:12-22. This abruptness is, however, more apparent than real. "If one speaks of brotherly love, it is easy to see how this idea could lead to the thought of dead brothers." 4 This church had suffered intense persecution from its pagan neighbors (2:14-15) and had as a result become a close community (4:9-10). The deaths of some of its members made those who remained sorrowful, for they were unsure if this meant the departed were no longer the Lord's possession. The issues of persecution and instances of death are interrelated, as Marxsen observes, though they do not stem from eschatological enthusiasm. 5 Instead, persecution and death had brought a separation to the church's brotherly love in that the departed were no longer a part of the community. The living are concerned with the question of whether the departed are "with the Lord" (v. 17) and whether they will be reunited in the end. 6 Paul begins by informing the church "concerning those who are asleep" (v. 13). The use of "sleep" (koima) as a euphemism for death was commonplace in antiquity, appearing as early as Homer (Il. 11:241) and frequently in the OT (e.g., [Gen 47:30](#); [Deut 31:16](#) LXX) and NT (e.g., [John 11:11](#); [Acts 7:36](#)). The use of koima for the sleep of death in classical literature did not necessarily entail any idea of continuing consciousness, reawakening in resurrection or an afterlife, as is equally true of the general biblical use. It is to be noted, however, that in hellenistic Judaism and apocalyptic literature sleep was increasingly conceived in terms of the peaceful rest and conscious blessedness of the righteous departed and their hope of future resurrection (e.g., [2 Esdr 7:32](#); [Dan 12:2](#)). 7 While there is no clear indication that anything other than death is intended in Paul's figurative use of the word, the fact that he uses the present (v. 13) and perfect participles ([1 Cor 15:20](#)) substantively to denote a state of being of the dead in Christ prior to resurrection (BAGD, 437) suggests the possibility that the hellenistic and apocalyptic use is also in mind. 8 The hina clause presents the problem which Paul is addressing, "that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope." The Thessalonians are not to be sorrowful as the rest (hoi loipoi), i.e., the pagans, who are without hope. What constitutes the hopelessness of the pagan world? It cannot be a lack of hope in a blessed afterlife, for this was common among the cults of Thessalonica. Immortality was a basic feature of the cults of Dionysus, Zeus, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Demeter, and the cult of Cabirus. The initiation rites of the mystery religions were to give its participants "pleasant hopes about the consummation of life and eternity" (Isocrates, Panegyricus, 28). "Blessed of earth-bound men is he who has seen these things, but he who dies without fulfilling the holy things, and he who is without a share of them, has no claim ever on such blessings, even when departed down to the moldy darkness" (The Homeric

Hymn to Demeter, 470). The initiation rites of the mystery religions were intended to secure salvation for those who were otherwise subject to destiny and corruption. "By taking part in prescribed rites the worshipper became united with God, was enabled in this life to enjoy mystical communion with him, and further was assured of immortality beyond death." 9 It seems overstated, then, to say that life after death was merely "hypothetical" among adherents of the mystery religions. 10 The assertion that ideas of an afterlife "were not universally held and probably did not affect the majority of the population" 11 is also suspect, given the persisting influence of the Homeric portrayal of the netherworld in the common mind well into the twentieth century. 12 Moreover, in view of the lack of clarity that existed among Jewish conceptions of personal eschatology, 13 it seems little better to assert that the pagan lack of hope resulted from conceptions of the afterlife which were "vague" and "not well-defined." 14

The "hope" which those not belonging to Christ did not have is precisely that: they had no hope of belonging to Christ. They did not have hope, because they did not truly know God (4:5) or have a relation to him through faith in Jesus Christ. 15 "The 'others' are those who do not have hope grounded in Christ and are, therefore, those who belong not to the community." 16 Belonging to Christ in community is the central issue facing the Thessalonians. They are concerned that the death of some of their members means the departed have been lost to the powers of darkness and destiny indigenous to their religious purview (cf. 5:4-7). They are concerned that those who sleep are no longer going to be "with the Lord."

Paul offers encouragement to the Thessalonian church so that they may not grieve as the pagans who truly do not have any hope of being with Christ, because those departed believers remain the Lord's possession. It is for this reason that he lays emphasis on their election (1:4; 2:12; 5:19). 17 Their election and salvation are made sure through the certainty that the Jesus who died also rose again (v. 14). Only this Jesus, who died and rose again, can save. The mystery cults, which generally alluded to the death and resurrection of a Savior-God called Lord (kurios), are not means of salvation. The correspondence of some of the mystery rites to Christianity would surely have perplexed the Thessalonians. In the cult of the Cabiri, for instance, purification was effected by water and blood relating to the dying and rebirth of the murdered and dismembered Dionysus. The murdered brother was identified with the Cabirus and it was this younger man-God, the son, who was worshipped by the Thessalonian pagans, not the older God, or father, as was typically worshipped in Olynthus, Pergamum, and Thebes. 18

The Thessalonians must have construed the Pauline apocalyptic proclamation "from Greek thought patterns, which would have resulted in a strong deformation of the content of that proclamation." 19 Those thought patterns involved a strong sense of fate and fear of the powers of gods and demons. Early Greek religion saw the powers of death as "divinities of the netherworld" (chthonioi daimones; Aeschylus, Persians,

628). People were said to have been carried off by the gods, though they had actually been conducted to hidden caverns (Livy, History of Rome, 39.13.13). Initiates of the cult of Cabirus invoked daimones to make an epiphany to ward off danger (Scholiast on Aristophanes, Peace, 277-78). This cult, perhaps the most influential in Thessalonica, looked to the powers of the air to preserve its initiates in this life and to deliver them safely to the isles of the blessed in the life to come. Those isles, though often considered as a place beneath the earth, were also viewed as existing in the airy ether above the earth to which the warm breath of the *psuchè* would return at death.

20 The *psuchè* was an "airy, ethereal shape of the deceased" like a condensation of human breath. Its "airy consistency" was in a "liminal state" after death. 21 The soul was also linked to the concept of the *daimon* as a mirror image of the deceased, a spectral shade that flitted between the worlds of the quick and the dead. 22

Many forms of worship and superstitious practice were invoked to free the individual from these powers and grant liberty to the soul at death. The divine origin of the soul and its immortality and imprisonment in the body arose with the Orphics in the later fifth and early fourth century BC and characterized later Pythagorean and Platonic thought. Also bound up with this concept was the doctrine of soul-wandering, whereby the soul could return again to earthly life, become a star, or return in the ether. "Always stronger is the view that the soul arrives after death in the heavenly region," 23 either in the popular view of the entrance of the soul into the ether or in the astrological construction. "Very frequently the view occurs in the epigrams that the *aithèr* takes up the soul." 24 The souls of the initiated were thus thought to ascend at the moment of death into the celestial world, there to undergo purification and obtain perfection and communion with the gods and other pious who dwell in the divine substance of the ether.

It is with these indigenous Greek ideas of the departure of the airy souls of the deceased into the airy and ethereal netherworld that the Thessalonians were concerned. They were anxious over the fate of those of their community who had died, whether they were lost to the powers of the gods and demons and were themselves to become daimones. If, on the basis of prior Pauline teaching and the general tenor of apocalyptic, the church viewed the sexual temptations (4:3-8), persecution (3:5), sickness (2:18?) and death it had faced as the work of demonic forces dwelling in the air and belonging to darkness, 25 it is easy to see how they would have become concerned about the fate of their departed loved ones in Christ as well as concerned about their own destiny in the gospel.

That the Thessalonians were perplexed by issues relating to their own religious and cultural milieu is easier to infer than proposals involving the resurrection: (1) that Paul had not given instruction to the church regarding the resurrection in view of the imminence of the *parousia*, provoking concern over the departed; 26 (2) that the church did not fully understand the doctrine of the resurrection and their emotional response to the death of fellow believers provoked concern over their fate 27 and

might have been construed as a judgment excluding them from final salvation; 28 (3) that Gnostic teachers had interposed a spiritual conception of the resurrection and insisted it had already occurred. 29 These proposals all fail to account for Paul's proximity to the death of Christians from the start of his ministry ([Acts 8:1; 9:1](#)), the centrality of the resurrection to his gospel ([1 Cor 15:3-4](#)), the fact that an acquaintance with the parousia on the part of the Thessalonians must have involved an understanding of the resurrection, and the general lack of development of the doctrine of the resurrection in this pericope. The church was not troubled by deficiency of faith in the resurrection.

The most common hypothesis for the problem at Thessalonica involves the purported disadvantage of the dead at the parousia, based on 4:15. It is suggested that the Thessalonians were concerned that their departed fellow believers would not participate in the parousia and so somehow be disadvantaged at the coming of the Lord. A variety of apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical texts are adduced to sustain the contention that the Gentile converts at Thessalonica were troubled by Jewish apocalypticism (e.g., [Dan 12:12-13](#); Mart. [Isa. 4:15](#); [2 Esdr 5:41-49](#); [13:24](#)). 30 "In Judaism great importance was attached to being alive at the time of the coming of the kingdom." 31 While this may have been true for hellenistic Judaism, it is exceedingly difficult to suppose that Gentiles recently converted from "idols" (1:9), i.e., indigenous Greek deities and mystery religions, would have been speculating on fine points of Jewish apocalyptic texts, particularly when most of the key citations for this proposal come from books written after 1 Thessalonians, such as 2 Esdras and the portion cited from Mart. Isa., both written at the end of the first century AD.

Notwithstanding, E. von Dobshütz maintains that the thoughts contained in these books are older than the writings themselves and allow the presumption of literary dependence. 32 This is, however, conjecture which rests on no solid evidence. There is no clear evidence to indicate that the departed righteous were at some disadvantage vis-a-vis the living.

In fact, the apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical evidence generally contains a mix of eschatological portrayals which prohibit any clear determination of personal destiny after death. The only text that truly bears any resemblance to [1 Thess 4:13-18](#) is [2 Esdr 13:24](#): "those who are left are more blessed than those who have died" (cf., however, 1 **Enoch** 103:3: "Your lot [those who died in righteousness] exceeds even that of the living ones"). The weight of this isolated text must be balanced by assertions within that same book that the pious departed attain immediate blessedness (7:88-99, e.g.). Indeed, the immediate blessedness of the righteous departed may well be the predominant view of pseudepigraphical literature. 33 While the body lies in the dust of the earth, the soul rises to heavenly bliss at the moment of death, following from the anthropological dualism that marks hellenistic Jewish thought, including the thought of Paul. 34 The Greek thought that influenced Jewish eschatology here converges with that indigenous to Thessalonica. The issue perplexing the

Thessalonian church is rooted in its own religious milieu and is provoked by what they view as the powers of darkness at work around them. The church wonders if their departed are "with the Lord".

Paul's Instruction and Comfort

Paul responds to the Thessalonian concern by asserting the centrality of the gospel message, that Jesus died and rose again (v. 14). "For if we believe" (ei gar pisteuomen) that Jesus died and rose again--this is the condition on which Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonians rests and probably introduces a pre-Pauline creedal formula, since Paul would generally write Christos instead of Ièsous and ègerthè instead of anestè. He calls upon the church to reckon with the significance of this creed for their departed fellow believers. Although Jesus' death is never spoken of in the euphemism of "sleep," probably to accent its concrete factuality, he did die and rise again. If the Thessalonians have been united by faith to this Jesus who died and rose again, then they can expect that their departed fellow believers who died will also rise again.

Correlatively, those who have fallen asleep "through Jesus" (dia tou Ièsous) can expect the same as Jesus after their death, i.e., resurrection. The prepositional phrase dia tou Ièsous is to be linked with the participle koimèthentas, since linking it to axei ("he will bring") is grammatically difficult and superfluous in light of that verb's subsequent sun aut ("with him"). The faithful who have died are thus spoken of as having slept from the moment of death in relation to Jesus. 35 Although an unusual way of putting it, Wanamaker thinks dia tou Ièsous is "little different from Paul's 'in Christ' formula." The dead are thus characterized as "in communion" with Christ, as "being-in-Christ." 37

If the faithful dead are "in communion" with Christ, it is difficult to admit Rigaux's statement that "God will reunite them to him when he brings them with him." 38 Paul seems here to be emphasizing that, from the moment of their deaths, the faithful have been in communion with Christ; if so, those who have been with Christ cannot be reunited to him. Although they have been asleep in the body, they have been alive in soul and in communion with the risen Christ ([2 Esdr 7:32](#); cf. also [Wis 3:1](#); [2 Esdr 4:35-37](#); [7:88-100](#)). They are here still spoken of as asleep in the body and so may not be assumed to have been resurrected. These may be the souls which are elsewhere spoken of as robed in white ([Rev 6:9-11](#)), the saints who "will come with the Lord with the robes which have been stored up in the seventh heaven above" (Mart. [Isa. 4:16](#); cf. also Apoc. of Elijah 5:32). God brings these enrobed saints with Jesus at his parousia in testimony to the fact that they have been and remain "with the Lord" (cf. 3:13). 39

Paul next makes a declaration by the "word of the Lord." Regardless of whether this indicates a Pauline development of a Matthean tradition or some other apocalyptic source and is thus a distinctively Pauline creation, it is difficult to suppose that Paul would in this pericope innovate an eschatological schema at odds with the Olivet

Discourse. If, then, Paul is alluding to an agraphon, what he understood to be the teaching of Jesus on the subject, there cannot be wide divergence between this parenetic midrash and [Matthew 24:29-31, 40-44](#). note⁴⁰

Paul now sets forth his understanding of the Lord's discourse as it applies to the Thessalonian concern. He begins by including himself among those who will be alive at the parousia: "we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord" (v. 15). That Paul believed he and many of his contemporaries would be alive at the parousia is evident by the somewhat emphatic first person plural construction employed here (hèmeis...ou mè phthas"men). Had Paul wished to exclude himself from such a view, he could have used the third person construction. Paul believes that he and many of the Thessalonian Christians will see the coming of the Lord.

Paul emphasizes this "remnant theology" of being among those who are left when he says that those who are alive and are left until the coming of the Lord shall in no way precede (ou mè phthas"men) those who have fallen asleep. Here he emphatically affirms the fact that those who have fallen asleep have gone before those who are alive and remain at the Lord's coming. Those who have fallen asleep are already with the Lord and are his possession; thus, they cannot be preceded by those subsequent to them. "The dead in the Lord are not snatched away, as such, from the power and nearness of the Lord." ⁴¹ Contrary to the indigenous Greek religious view, the souls of those who are asleep in Jesus do not wander and have not been hindered from ascending to the Lord at death by the powers of the cultic gods and demons. ⁴² To them belongs the precedence of being "with the Lord" in time and in honor. "The believers who have submitted to the gospel and have fought to remain faithful to him" enjoy rest as they gather around the risen Jesus. ⁴³ There is no special privilege or blessing for those who are still alive and are left at the parousia.

In order to prove that the souls of the faithful departed are "with the Lord," Paul next invokes standard apocalyptic military motifs (v. 16). The scenario here is one of eschatological conflict. "The Lord himself will descend from heaven," coming forth from his transcendent abode as the conqueror of evil and judge of all. The language of this entire pericope may be drawn from the tradition embodied in 1QM, where, in i 4-17, for example, God appears with all the angels of his dominion and the humans bound to his communion to bring doom upon the sons of darkness amidst the shout of gods and of men (cf. also xii 1-18; xiii 7-18; xiv 4-15; xvi 1-xviii 1). The biblical tradition on which 1QM draws here and which probably has also influenced Paul is [Zech 14:1-5](#), since the idea of a "descent" is implicit there in the declaration that "on that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives" (v. 4; cf. also [2 Esdr 13:12-35](#); [Isa 31:4](#) LXX). The theophanies of God in the OT may also be involved here, as Paul recalls such passages as [Mic 1:3](#) and the whole tradition of holy war wherein God is viewed as the commander of the angelic hosts who come as his agents of judgment upon the impenitent ([2 Sam 24:16](#); [2 Kgs 19:35](#); [1 Enoch 1:8-9](#); Syb. Or.

2:287, 3:309) and of deliverance of the elect (dead [[Luke 16:22](#); [Jude 9](#)] and living [[1 Enoch](#) 104; Apoc. Elijah 5:2]).

The Lord will descend to do battle against the powers of darkness and to deliver his elect once and for all. The "cry of command," "the archangel's call," and "the sound of the trumpet of God" are very likely apocalyptic expressions for the same occurrence, namely the summons of Christ to gather his people (cf. [Matt 24:31](#)) and to enact judgment upon the impenitent (cf. [2 Thess 1:8-10](#)). As is common among portrayals of theophanies, these three phrases qualify each other as demonstrations of the divine summons which are seen and heard by faith amidst natural conditions, such as a tremendous storm. Thunder is used to describe both the voice of God ([Exod 19:19](#); [Job 37:4-5](#); [40:9](#); [Ps 29:3](#); [77:18](#); [Rev 4:5](#)) and the voice of his angels ([Rev 6:1](#); [10:3-4](#); [19:6](#) [saints and/or angels]). Thus, the "cry of command," whether it comes from God, Christ, or an angel, is further explained by the sound of "the archangel's call," both of which are described in Scripture by the sound of thunder. Finally, the voice of God ([Exod 19:16](#); [20:18](#); [Zeph 9:14](#); [Rev 4:1](#)), the risen Christ ([Rev 1:10](#)) as well as the possible voice of the angels are all described by means of the trumpet, which is associated in the OT with the theophanic coming of God ([Exod 19:16](#); [Isa 27:13](#)), particularly in judgment.

Beginning with the Israelite conquest after the exodus, there arose a close association within the "holy war" motif of the sounding of the trumpet and the subsequent shout that realizes the victory God has promised his people over the enemy (cf. [Josh 6:20](#); [Judg 7:18](#)). This "holy war" association of the trumpet with the shout was thus taken up in prophetic messages of judgment (e.g., [Amos 2:2](#)) to demonstrate the power of God ([Ps 47:5](#)). In fact, the association of the trumpet and the shout has an almost proverbial character as regards swiftness and power in battle. In [Job 39:25](#) the combination of the trumpet, shout, and thunder in the figure of a voice suggests that these ideas were connected in a single concept involving the swift destruction of enemies and deliverance from the harm of war.

The trumpet functions in 1QM to assemble the entire community, to advance and marshall the troops, to sound the charge, to denote carnage and ambush, and to recall troops from the battle (iii 1-11; vii 8-ix.9). This military use of the trumpet seems most in keeping with the sense of the passage and is thus employed to marshal the hosts of heaven and to assemble the saints ([Matt 24:31](#); Syb. Or. 4:174), not to raise the dead. 44 The dead will be raised simultaneously with the sound of the trumpet (cf. [1 Cor 15:52](#)), but the sound is essentially a summons to gather for war and the consequent communion of the saints (dead and living) with the Lord. 45

At the moment the dead are raised, i.e., when the enrobed souls receive their glorified bodies, "then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up (arpagèsometha) together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (4:17). As has been previously observed, there is no precedent in biblical or pseudepigraphical literature for the rapture or assumption of believers in general. "The rapture of all believers is

peculiar to Paul." 46 This makes the common assertions that Paul is using the apocalyptic traditions "sporadically" rather puzzling, for there is nothing in the literature on which Paul may have based such a teaching. The assertion, "the imagery of assumption must have been familiar to Paul, steeped as he was in Jewish apocalyptic thought," 47 makes no sense, for there is nothing regarding a literal general assumption anywhere in apocalyptic thought. A rapture is only spoken of in the tradition with reference to exceptional individuals such as **Enoch** ([Gen 5:24](#)), Moses (J. Ant. 4.326), and Elijah ([2 Kgs 2:11](#)). Unless one is prepared to contend that Paul considered the Thessalonians (and the rest of contemporary Christianity) to be exceptional individuals on a par with **Enoch**, Moses, and Elijah, there is simply no basis in Paul's Jewish background or the Olivet Discourse for a general assumption of believers. 48

Given the unique nature of this Pauline doctrine in a letter which is supposed to correct eschatological misconceptions, it must be asked if it is appropriate to assume that Paul is here innovating a completely new teaching. Proper pedagogy elucidates the unclear by the clear, not by the unprecedented. Why would Paul have concocted a "general assumption of all believers," a doctrine which has no basis in any other Jewish or Christian teaching, in hopes of alleviating misunderstanding among the Thessalonians regarding the fate of their departed? It should rather be supposed that Paul is not teaching a general rapture at all. That this verse involves a literal rapture of believers is far from necessary, particularly in light of 1QM which may well form the conceptual background for much of this pericope. In the 1QM xiv 2-17 hymn of victory of the sons of light over the sons of darkness (cf. [1 Thess 5:4-5](#)), those who have been preserved from death in battle praise God for their own victory over evil using the metaphor of assumption: "raise from the dust for yourself and subdue gods" (vv 14-15). 49 This metaphorical use of a rapture idea is also found in some other pseudepigraphical texts. 1 **Enoch** 96:2 asserts, "your children shall be raised high up and be made openly visible like eagles," and "you shall ascend and enter the crevices of the earth" in authority over sinners. 50 Here "the righteous are assured of reconciliation and miraculous protection" in the judgment upon sinners. TMos 10:8-9 says, "Then will you be happy, O Israel! And you will mount up above the necks and wings of an eagle. Yea, all things will be fulfilled. And God will raise you to the heights. Yea, he will fix you firmly in the heaven of stars, in the place of their habitations." This is likely an allusion to Israel's exaltation over its enemies. 51 None of the contexts of these pseudepigraphical texts supports the idea of a literal general rapture of believers. Rather, these texts demonstrate the metaphorical use of the assumption motif as divine assurance of protection and victory over evil in eschatological conflict. In his use of harpaz" Paul may therefore be describing the protection of his people and the victory which Christ obtains over evil in the figure of a rapture of the sons of light after the manner of 1QM and certain other pseudepigraphical texts. 52

Those who are left, then, are protected from the powers of darkness and claimed by the Lord as his own. They are claimed by the Lord "in the clouds," the symbolic and representational manifestation of God's judgment and deliverance regularly associated with theophanies which likewise forms the basis for all portrayals of Christ's parousia. 53 By means of the clouds (and fire, [2 Thess 1:7](#)) the Lord distinguishes his elect from the condemned, as in the OT pillar of cloud and fire, which also functioned to inflict divine judgment upon the enemies of God. 54 "Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" ([1 Thess 1:10](#)) does so not by wafting believers away, but by preserving them amidst the tribulation brought upon the world of disobedience through the OT motif of the cloud. 55

As is commonly noted, the expression which Paul next uses to indicate the "meeting" with the Lord (eis apantèsin) is one that is used in hellenistic Greek for the civic custom of antiquity whereby a public welcome was accorded by a city to important visitors or conquerors. 56 The word is well suited to Paul's interest here, for he envisions the ultimate war whereby the conquering Christ vanquishes the powers of darkness that have upset the assurance of his elect people. Those who have agonized over the fate of their departed fellow believers and over their own end are assured of their protection and the victory of Christ. They who have awaited the consummation will behold the victory of their conquering king.

The departed saints coming with Christ and his angelic hosts gather "in the air" with the preserved believers who are left in order that they may all behold the victory of Christ over the powers of darkness. Aèr here is not a "cipher for the transcendent 'realm' from which the Lord comes," 57 since this noun is never used as a synonym in the NT for ouranos, from which the Lord is explicitly said to descend (v 16). It is also not a meeting place from which the Lord returns with his people to earth, as Marshall suggests, for there is no hint in this text or the Olivet Discourse of any such return. Moreover, it is difficult to agree with Marshall that the place of meeting is inconsequential, 58 since aèr had notorious connotations for both the Jew and the Greek. "It is unlikely that Christ and Christians remain 'in the air' because of the demonic associations of 'air'." 59 If there were no particular significance to be found there, it is difficult to understand why Paul would have mentioned meeting "in the air."

The air, specifically the ether, was considered by the Greeks to be the abode of the gods, the daimones, and the souls of the departed. 60 The air, then, is the abode of the very characters about which the Thessalonian Christians were concerned. They were anxious about the fate of their departed fellow believers. The state of their souls, sometimes considered to be a warm air, was in doubt. Had they become daimones wandering throughout the ether or had they become a star or would they return to earth? These questions would have followed quite naturally from their native religious milieu. Were these departed loved ones in the possession of the gods and powers of darkness that stood in opposition to the gospel which Paul had proclaimed? The air

would have signified for the Thessalonian Christians the battleground of spiritual existence. It is inconceivable that Paul would have casually or cavalierly utilized a term that carried such significance to these people, particularly in light of his expressed purpose of instructing and comforting them.

"Air" also carried great significance for the Jewish apocalyptic theology of the apostle Paul. In Jewish apocalyptic thought the air was considered to be the domain of evil spirits ([Eph 2:2](#); [6:12](#)) and the lower regions of the heavens were viewed as the place of great struggle between the hosts of Satan and of God ([Rev 12:7-12](#); Mart. [Isa. 7:9](#)). The souls of both the righteous and the unrighteous were thought to reside in these lower regions of the heavens, be it in Paradise or Sheol, awaiting the final judgment (2 [Enoch](#) 3-20). This meant that the soul had to pass through the realms of the demonic en route to Hades. "Whether it is a question of Satan and the fallen Watchers, or of the demons of the air, the common dwelling place of the evil angels is in the lower zones of heaven, those which are in direct contact with the earth. This has the important consequence for the Jewish Christian world-view that souls must in their ascent to heaven after death pass through the spheres of the demons." 61 With this in mind, it is equally untenable that Paul would have casually utilized a term with so many notorious associations from Jewish apocalyptic in his response to the Thessalonians, because there is a significant convergence between their concerns in the semantic domain of this word.

Although he cautiously alludes to the possibility of significance in Paul's use of "air" and builds no further on it, Morris is correct in stating, "The fact that the Lord chooses to meet His saints there, on the demons' home ground so to speak, shows something of His complete mastery over them." 62 The air is the place of final conflict between the conquering Christ and the powers of darkness which are perceived by the Thessalonians to threaten the destiny of the departed and the fate of those who remain. Jesus, who died and rose again, will come with the righteous departed, demonstrating that they have been with him and remain his eternal possession, and those who remain alive will see be equally protected and see the victory of their Lord over the powers of darkness. The protection and final victory for those who have been humiliated is described as the rapture of the saints, as other pseudepigraphical texts corroborate in this metaphorical use of the assumption motif. The "air," then, is the climactic place of final eschatological conflict wherein the risen Christ claims his victory and the eternal possession of his people.

Milligan rightly observes that the weapons of the Christians who are left are purely defensive, to guard them in the battle which the Lord Jesus wins solely by the word of his power. 63 Those who remain are preserved by the clouds as they behold in faith a vision of the glorious coming of Christ with his army to win the eschatological victory over the forces of darkness which had their abode in the air. The "meeting in the air" is not a literal snatching away of believers into the air, but a metaphor describing what Christ and his hosts accomplish in the day of his coming, vanquishing the gods and

demons which the Thessalonians feared had jeopardized their own salvation and that of their departed loved ones. At the parousia, when the angels "gather his elect from the four winds" ([Matt 24:31](#)), at their "assembling to meet him" ([2 Thess 2:1](#)), they behold the victory of Christ over Satan and the air is purified of all demonic forces. The "meeting in the air" is not a literal rapture of believers, but a symbolic depiction of the final battle of Christ and the powers of darkness which oppose him and his people. The Thessalonians were troubled by their indigenous Greek religious milieu and the control these cultic gods and demons could exert over the fate of their departed fellow believers. This fear also jeopardized their own assurance of final salvation in Christ. Paul responds by declaring that Christ will come with those departed believers, demonstrating that they have been and will remain his; they and the angelic hosts come to behold the final battle which Christ wages with the powers of darkness inhabiting the air. Those who remain are preserved from the final tribulation; they are "caught up," protected and granted victory, by their conquering king, the Lord Jesus Christ. In being "caught up" together with the enrobed souls of their departed fellow believers to meet the Lord "in the air," the Thessalonians are assured of being the Lord's possession as Christ destroys the powers that threatened them and their community. Summarily and inferentially (kai hout's), the Thessalonians are thereby assured that their community of believers will "always be with the Lord" (v. 17). This is the comfort and encouragement that Paul seeks to provide this church in this extraordinary pericope about "the meeting in the air."

Notes

1 I. H. Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 130.

2 E. Lohse, The New Testament Environment (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 233.

3 K. P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," NTS 31 (1985) 353.

4 B. Rigaux, Saint Paul: Les Epitres aux Thessaloniens (EB; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1956) 529.

5 W. Marxsen, Der Erste Brief an die Thessalonicher (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979) 25-26.

6 A. F. J. Klijn, "[1 Thessalonians 4.13-18](#) and its Background in Apocalyptic Literature," Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett (ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson; London: SPCK, 1982) 68; J. E. Frame, The Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912) 167; P. Hoffman, Die Toten in Christus (NTAbh 2; Munster: Aschendorff, 1966) 208; Rigaux, Thessaloniens, 537.

7 Hoffmann, Die Toten in Christus, 195-202.

8 Cf. E. von Dobschütz, Die Thessalonicher-Briefe (MeyerK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1909) 187.

9 C. K. Barrett, ed., The New Testament Background: Selected Documents (2d ed.; New York: Harper Row, 1987) 120.

- 10 J. Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970) 135.
- 11 Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 119; cf. also von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*, 189; G. Milligan, *St Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.) 57; L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959) 137.
- 12 M. P. Nilsson (*Greek Folk Religion* [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961] 115-16) says that the general Greek idea of the other world, the dark and gloomy Hades with its pale, dumb, powerless shadows, "was so ingrained in the Greek mind that, in spite of the fact that Christianity has preached quite a different conception for nearly two thousand years, the nether world of the Greek peasant is the same today". The second-century satirist Lucian mocked the people for taking their ideas of the afterlife from "Homer, Hesiod and other myth-makers" (*On Mourning*, cited by N. J. Richardson, "Early Greek Views about Life after Death", *Greek Religion and Society* [ed. P. E. Eastering and J. V. Muir; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985] 53).
- 13 Cf. P. Volz, *Die Eschatologie der jüdischen Gemeinde im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1934) 256-72.
- 14 C. A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990) 165.
- 15 Marxsen, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, 66.
- 16 T. Holtz, *Der Erste Brief an die Thessalonicher* (EKK 13; Zurich: Benziger Verlag, 1986) 189; cf. Hoffman, *Die Toten in Christus*, 209.
- 17 Cf. R. F. Collins, *Studies in the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (BETL 66; Leuven: University Press, 1984) 236-38.
- 18 See B. Hemberg, *Die Kabiren* (Uppsala: Almqvist Wiksells, 1950); idem, "Kabiren", *RGG* 3:1081-82.
- 19 Holtz, *Der Erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, 187.
- 20 "The aether has received their souls, the earth their bodies" (Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca* #21, line 6, cited from D. G. Rice and J. E. Stambaugh, *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion* [SBL SBS 14; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979]) 250. Hoffman (*Die Toten in Christus*, 36, 51) says that Hades was moved to heaven from the underworld in the hellenistic time, though it could also be localized in the ether. "Ritual traditions and fantasy combine to fill in details of the sojourn in the after-world and of the path which must first be traversed. Contradictions are freely tolerated; sometimes, as in the *Odyssey*, the kingdom of the dead is located far away at the edge of the world beyond the *Oceanos*, and sometimes, as in the *Iliad*, it lies directly beneath the earth" (W. Burkett, *Greek Religion* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985] 196).
- 21 J. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 23, 93.

22 L. B. Zaidman and P. S. Pentel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 10. "One of the functions of the funeral rite was to help the transition of the soul into the afterlife" (Bremmer, *Early Greek Concept of the Soul*, 100).

23 Hoffmann, *Die Toten in Christus*, 44.

24 *Ibid.*, 44, 46.

25 Cf. O. Böcher, *Das Neue Testament und die dämonischen Mächte* (SBS 58; Stuttgart: KBW, 1972) 20-26; G. Kurze, *Der Engels- und Teufelsglaube des Apostels Paulus* (Freiburg: Herdersche, 1915) 29-67 describes the apostle's concerns regarding satanic and demonic activity in hindering his ministry, contending against believers, and plotting against people's souls.

26 As suggested by W. Marxsen, "Auslegung von 1 Thess 4, 14-18", *ZTK* 66 (1969) 22-37; J. Becker, *Auferstehung der Toten im Urchristentum* (SBS 82; Stuttgart: KBW, 1976) 46-54; G. Lüdemann, *Paulus, der Heidenapostel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1980) 1.220-30.

27 P. Siber, *Mit Christus Leben* (ATANT 61; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971) 13-22; Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 120-22; F. F. Bruce, 1 and 2 Thessalonians (WBC 45; Waco: Word, 1982) 95.

28 Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 136.

29 W. Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972) 160-67; W. Harnisch, *Eschatologische Existenz* (FRLANT 110; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1975) 16-51.

30 Cf. Klijn, "[1 Thessalonians 4.13-18](#) and its Background in Apocalyptic Literature," 69-72.

31 Rigaux, *Les Epitres aux Thessaloniens*, 540.

32 *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*, 185.

33 Volz, *Die Eschatologie der jüdischen Gemeinde*, 270-72.

34 Hoffman (*Die Toten in Christus*, 337) asserts, "it can hardly be disputed that Paul, with the representation of communion with Christ after death, shares a representation of life after death that already had gained currency in the Jewish tradition". While Hoffmann believes a direct influence of hellenism or Platonic thought cannot be demonstrated, he contends that Paul's assertions presuppose an anthropology which was influenced by a vulgarized philosophical representation of the immortality of the soul, though this immortality falls short of "salvation", which concerns the entire human being. J. W. Cooper has persuasively argued for a "functional holism" in Paul, whereby soul and body are functionally integrated and constitute the person a psychophysical unity in life, only becoming a dichotomy of ego and earthly organism at death when the soul enters the presence of the Lord (Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: *Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989]).

- 35 Bruce thinks the aorist participle ἐπελθόντες" relates to the moment of their falling asleep (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 98), meaning Paul is stressing the relation of the faithful departed to Christ from the moment of death.
- 36 Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 169.
- 37 Hoffmann, *Die Toten in Christus*, 213.
- 38 Rigaux, *Les Epîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 537.
- 39 Kurze (*Der Engels- und Teufelsglaube*, 20-21) points out that the ἀγίοι accompanying Jesus at his parousia must be the righteous departed, since Paul never uses this word of angels.
- 40 Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 171; cf. J. B. Orchard, "Thessalonians and the Synoptic Gospels," *Bib* 19 (1938) 19-42.
- 41 H. Schlier, *Der Apostel und Seine Gemeinde* (Freiburg: Herder, 1972) 79.
- 42 Nilsson, (*Greek Folk Religion*, 115) observes that "the gods, especially Hecate and Hermes of the netherworld" were asked to "tie the soul, the intellect, the tongue, and the limbs" of those who were cursed, as the Thessalonians may have been by their pagan neighbors.
- 43 L.-M. Demailly, *La Jeune Eglise de Thessalonique* (Paris: duCerf, 1963) 51.
- 44 Contra Frame, 1 Thessalonians, 175, Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 174, Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 128. "The presence of the trumpet seems rather to be an imaginative element taken from the apocalyptic topos to dramatize the final events in a martial manner" (Collins, *Studies in the First Letter to the Thessalonians*, 251). Beyond the trumpets' "tactical purposes, to encourage the warriors and frighten the enemy," "their principal function in Israel was to stress the religious character of the war" (Y. Yadin, *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962] 113).
- 45 "In the eschatological combat, Paul has dispelled the darkness by the preaching of the gospel and all Christians dispel it too by their faithfulness to the gospel" (Demailly, *La Jeune Eglise de Thessalonique*, 113).
- 46 Hoffmann, *Die Toten in Christus*, 225.
- 47 J. Plevnik, "The Taking Up of the Faithful and the Resurrection of the Dead in [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)," *CBQ* 46 (1984) 280-81.
- 48 In Homer *Od.* 4:561-70 there is also the idea that individual humans who are especially beloved by the gods are transformed and carried away to the Elysian fields without ever dying, hence in full corporeality.
- 49 B. Jongeling (*SSN 4; Le Rouleau de la Guerre: Des Manuscrits de Qumran* [Assen: van Gorkum, 1962] 320) says, "The expression indicates the elevation of those who have been humiliated." Col. xiv was an independent fragment which, with xiii, was joined to ii-ix and xv-xix to form 1QM sometime in the first half of the first century AD, when the prospect of an imminent eschaton was widely held and Rome's increasing oppression of the Jews was viewed as the prelude to the final war. Cf. P. R.

Davies, 1QM, *The War Scroll from Qumran: Its Structure and History* (BibOr 32; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977) 223-24.

50 A. Dillmann, *Das Buch Henoch* (Leipzig: F. C. W. Vogel, 1853) 307; he admits, however, that the images used "are not happily chosen." R. H. Charles (*The Books of Enoch or 1 Enoch* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1912] 238) thinks the verse "must be interpolation; it is foolish in itself and interrupts the context."

51 So, e.g., J. Priest, "Testament of Moses", *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. J. Charlesworth; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) 1.932-33 nn. e, g.

52 There is little in the semantic domain of *harpazo* to assist with the validation of this suggested use. W. Foerster ("*harpazo*" TDNT 1.472-73) notes that in the NT this word is used "in parables which speak of the conflict between the kingdom of God and that of Satan," meaning "to capture in war" ([Matt 12:29](#); [John 10:12, 28-29](#)). Certainly Paul is using the word to speak of the eschatological conflict between the two kingdoms, though he is not using the word to signify the capture of the enemy but instead the protection of his people. The word is also used to denote "the rapture of visions" ([2 Cor 12:2, 4](#); [Rev 12:5](#); [Acts 8:39](#)), which is how Foerster classifies the use in [1 Thess 4:17](#). That Paul is here alluding to a vision or revelation is unlikely, however, since this would entail the untenable notion of a contemporaneous corporate vision or revelation (*harpagèsometha*).

53 Cf. R. E. Otto, *Coming in the Clouds: An Evangelical Case for the Invisibility of Christ at his Second Coming* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994).

54 Ibid., chaps 3-5, 10 and *passim*.

55 It is to be noted that in the Olivet Discourse, the coming of the Son of man is seen as analogous to the Noachic flood, which "swept them all away" ([Matt 24:39](#)), i.e., the impenitent, whereas the ones who are "left" are those who are preserved in the day of his coming.

56 Cf. E. Peterson, "*apantésis*," TDNT 1.380-81; the word is used, e.g., in Josephus, J.W. 7.100 of the people of Antioch greeting the conqueror Titus Caesar.

57 Schlier, *Der Apostel und Seine Gemeinde*, 82.

58 Marshall, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 131.

59 E. Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (HNTC; New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 200.

60 Bruce rightly says, "we should not overpress the classical distinction between the lower air (*aër*) and the upper air (*aither*, not found in the NT), although the mention of clouds would in any case suggest the lower air" (1 and 2 Thessalonians, 103).

61 J. Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1964) 191-92.

62 Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 146."

63 Milligan, *St Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 68.